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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that the diversity of existing parenting programs is an advantage, and that one program cannot possibly meet the needs and interests of all parents. The challenge, therefore, is to find the curriculum that will best suit a specific parent or group of parents. The discussion in this paper develops a questionnaire for professionals and parents to use for this process, focusing on two questions: (1) What does the curriculum offer?; and (2) What is the parent looking for? First, the paper identifies descriptive characteristics of curricula. Second, for each characteristic the paper develops a list and/or set of questions that can serve as a means of describing what a curriculum offers. These lists and questions form the first part of the questionnaire and provide a means of answering the first question, i.e., what does a curriculum offer. Third, the paper adapts the lists and questions so that they ask about parents' strengths, interests, and preferences. These questions form the second and third parts of the questionnaire and provide a means of identifying the needs of those who will use the curriculum. The second part is for parents to answer; the third part is to answer about a group of parents. A comparison of the answers to what a curriculum offers and what parents are looking for should guide people to select a curriculum that will meet their needs. Contains 46 references. (EV)

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CHOOSING PARENTING CURRICULA BASED ON THE STRENGTHS, INTERESTS, AND PREFERENCES OF THE PARENTS WHO WILL USE THEM

There is a wealth of parenting curricula available (Carter, 1997). All aim to provide parents with important information and skills. The variety often leaves parents and professionals confused about which to choose. They look for the perfect curriculum that will meet all the needs of those using it.

A close examination of the issues demonstrates the inevitability of the need for this diversity of materials. Parents vary in their requests for information and their requests change as children grow. Pregnant couples ask for information and skills preparing them for the childbirth experience. Parents of pre-adolescent children want to know about adolescent development and communication skills. Parents with children with learning disabilities ask for information about working with different learning styles. Programs for these various needs differ in content, all are needed and none are interchangeable; The diversity of parenting curricula is absolutely necessary.

How then can parents and professionals select the curricula that will best serve those who are to use them? It is an obvious decision for the pregnant couple to select a childbirth class or parents with a ten-year old, a curriculum on anticipating adolescence. The decision in reality is not so simple. Does the pregnant couple want a Lamaze or a Boyer type of birth and need the respective relevant information and skills? Do the parents of pre-adolescent children want the skills for a tough love approach or those to help their children become self-reliant people? The same kinds of questions can be asked of parents of children with learning disabilities, of preschoolers or of children who are college bound.

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To be able to choose curriculum wisely, parents and professionals require answers to two questions: What does the curriculum offer? and What is the parent looking for?

The discussion in this paper develops a questionnaire for professionals and parents to use to answer these two questions. First, the discussion identifies descriptive characteristics of curricula. Second, for each characteristic the discussion develops a list and/or set of questions that can serve as a means of describing what a curriculum offers. These lists and questions form the first part of the questionnaire and provide a means of answering the first question, i.e. what does a curriculum offer. Third, the discussion adapts the lists and questions so that they ask about parents' strengths, interests and preferences. These questions form the second and third parts of the questionnaire and provide a meant of identifying the needs of those who will use the curriculum. The second part is for parents to answer: the third is to answer about a group of parents. A comparison of the answers to what a curriculum offers and what parents are looking for, will guide people to select a curriculum that will meet their needs.

DESCRIBING CURRICULUM AND IDENTIFYING PARENTAL STRENGTHS, INTERESTS AND PREFERENCES

Eight characteristics identify qualities of written curricula that help potential users select the most appropriate one for them (). They are: the objectives of the curriculum, its content, the methods used to present the content, the emotional support emanating from it, the type of leadership, the format, cost and its availability.

Parents and professionals working with them can ask questions of any curriculum about these characteristics. They can ask such questions as: Is the purpose of the curriculum what the parent is looking for? Is the content? Are the methods of presentation ones which the parent will be comfortable with and which will enable them to master the material? Is the format suitable? Is the curriculum affordable?

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With some questions, the answers will be more relevant if there are standards against which to compare them. For example, knowing the kinds of content parents use (the standard) when nurturing their children gives the information needed to answer what content the curriculum does and does not offer. It gives parents information about what they may need to know that they had not considered. Knowing how the methods of presentation of content vary (the standard) allows users of the curriculum to consider which methods will best suit their preferred methods of learning.

Each of the following sections takes up one of these characteristics of curriculum. Each describes the characteristic, offers a standard for the characteristic when relevant, and adds a method for recording the characteristic on the questionnaire to be used when selecting curricula.

Purpose of Curriculum and Goals of Parents

In the introduction of most curricula is a statement describing what using this curriculum is to accomplish. The statement gives a concise overview that the reviewer can keep in mind when reading the curriculum. For example, one program's introduction reads "This program addresses violence against the self (drugs/alcohol), and violence against others (child abuse, domestic violence, crime, gangs) through five curriculum component areas: …. All component areas are used to assist parents and children in developing strong ethnic/cultural roots, a positive Parent-Child Relationship and life skills necessary for functioning in today's society (Steele & Marigna, 1998, pp 1). Such a statement gives the reader a clear idea of what to expect to find in the content of the curriculum.

Parents or professionals will be clearer in their intentions if they articulate what they want to learn. "I want to learn how to yell less." "How can I get my teen-ager to be more respectful?"

On the questionnaire (see Appendix p. 22) is a place for the reviewer of a curriculum to write the purpose of that curriculum. On page 24 of the questionnaire parents can list their reasons for

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wanting a parent program and on page 25 professionals can list what they see as parents reasons for wanting a parent program.

Matching the stated intentions and the curricula goals provides a general means of sorting curricula as to which will be relevant for a specific group of parents at a given time, i.e. which programs deal with preparing for kindergarten and which for adolescence.

Curriculum Content and Parental Strengths, Needs and Preferences

Descriptions of curricula invariably review the content covered. Descriptions are often lists. The list may be of situations (potty training, the two-year-old, home-work), of skills ("I" messages, reflective listening, stress management) and/or even of research (brain research, sleep patterns, different kinds of intelligence). These lists can be incredibly long.

Just listing situations gives no indication of other content that is important to consider when selecting curriculum (Thomas, 1998). For example, most curriculum include discussions of children's developmental level and temperament pattern when talking about potty training or home-work. This is important content and, frequently not mentioned in a list of situations. Nor do lists tell how the curriculum recommends a situation be handled (is the child to be spanked or is the parent given options); the suggested role of the parent in dealing with the situations (don't get involved or it is a teachable moment) or the competencies parents need to have to deal with the situation (know how to resolve conflict or discuss values without lecturing).

The issue is to determine what content is relevant to consider.

One approach is to identify what content parents use. This information can be obtained by analyzing what parents do as they nurture their children and what personal competencies they use while doing so (Heath, in process). These identified competencies can then be a standard for

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deciding which a given curriculum covers and what strengths and interests a parent or a group of parents have.

Identifying Parental Competencies

To identify the competencies parents may use as they nurture their children, the complexity of the parenting process must be recognized. As current theory on chaos is demonstrating (Kossman, & Bullrich, 1997), parenting is a complex process demanding in any single situation multiple abilities of parents.

A simple situation will illustrate the complexity.

Two women, sitting side-by-side on a couch, were nursing their babies. Both babies were nursing vigorously. Even to the untrained eye the styles of nursing of these two women were remarkably different. One mother, Kate, held her nine-month-old infant very very tightly as if she were afraid of dropping him. But she also held him awkwardly low on her lap. This mother looked straight ahead not even glancing at her baby and not participating in the conversation around her. The other mother, Belinda, held her baby high up on her chest with her arm supported by a pillow. She had one arm around the upper part of her year-old baby's body while she tickled his bare feet with her other hand. This mother was looking directly into her baby's eyes grinning at him. He even seemed to be grinning back as his mouth expanded some over the breast. His eyes were certainly twinkling.

The mothers, who happened to be sisters, laughed over their different nursing styles. "I could never play with Tim the way you do," said Kate. "Once his immediate hunger was satisfied he'd stop nursing and be hungry again in half an hour. He'd eat by driblets. I have to work at not interacting with him. It seems to help him keep focused."

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The other sister nodded, "Tony has always focused so intently on what he is doing. Now that he's older he can focus on two things at the same time. But you know, our physiology makes for our different nursing styles too just like it did when we tried wearing each others' bras. Our breasts are shaped differently and we, therefore, hold our babies differently."

This short scenario illustrates the complexity of issues involved with which parents deal as they nurture their children. Just in the matter of breast-feeding, these mothers had to take into consideration their infant's temperament patterns, their different needs, their (the mothers') own needs, the mothers' physiological make-up and how to adapt to it.

The scenario also illustrates a process that parents often follow as they deal with the complexity of parenting (Heath, submitted for publication). First, when looking at this process in detail, is the fact that both women were involved with their babies and were psychologically available to them. They had, for example, taken time and energy to note their infant's style of feeding. Second, they had gathered information about their babies by observing them and by being aware of what they themselves were doing. They had collected data. Third, these women's discussion indicated that they had options, babies could be nursed in different ways. Fourth, even in this short dialogue, these two women illustrated that they had a body of knowledge about children in general and specific knowledge about their individual babies that they used as guides to help them decide how to nurse their infants. For example, they knew babies differ in temperament patterns and they knew their babies' individual temperaments. They knew how babies had to latch onto the breast and how to hold their babies so that they could do so. Fifth, they had skills. Each knew how to hold her baby so that her infant could effectively grab onto his mother's nipples. Sixth, the mothers were doing what they had planned; they were nursing their babies. Lastly, these mothers reflected about what they were doing and how they were doing it. Throughout the process these mothers had dealt with situational relationships, if the baby moves a lot and that stops his nursing, then hold him tightly and don't look at or play with him. Figure one outlines this process and begins to illustrate the complexity of parenting.

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By drawing from the empirical literature, it is possible to elaborate this process sketched from the vignette. This elaboration identifies parental competencies--the attitudes, information and skills--that are relevant to parenting and to hypothesize the interaction among them. Figure two diagrams the process and the relevant competencies. The following is a brief discussion of the relevant points with supportive documentation. (For a thorough discussion of the theory and more supporting references see Heath, submitted for publication).

First, parents' attitudes give them the motivation to work on an issue. From the research there are three identifiable components to parents overall attitude. One relates to valuing the parenting role. Parents who value their role, who view it as important, will be more involved (Fogel, & Melson, 1986; Palacios, Gonzalez, & Moreno 1992; Rutter 1974). Two relates to an eagerness to be involved: These are parents who participate in activities and enjoy interacting with their children (MacPhee, Ramey, & Yeates 1984; Sagi, 1982; Wiegerink, & Comfort 1987). And three relates to being psychologically available. These parents want to know what is going on. They want to know what their children are thinking and feeling. They want to know them as people (Belsky, 1984; Greenspan, & Greenspan, 1985; Greeenspan, & Salmon, 1993; Rosenthal, & Keshet 1981).

However, attitudes, as research has repeatedly shown, do not necessarily produce expected parental behavior (Heath, 1976). There is more to how parents go about doing what they do than wanting to do it.

Second in the process of dealing with a situation is identifying and describing it. Parents think about specific situations. How do I want to feed my baby? My two-year old is biting. How can I stop her? I have to get milk at the super market. How can I manage with my hungry tired almost-three year-old? My child is not learning to read as fast as his brother did. What should we do? Our sixteen-year-old will be driving the car in a year. What can we do to make him as safe a driver as possible? Parents plan around specific situations (Heath, in process).

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To be able to plan around a specific situation parents have to describe it. This part of the process requires that parents have good observational skills. Observations are the data with which parent work. What is happening? What are people saying? What is happening when a fight breaks out between the siblings? Are there steps leading up to the actual fighting? Since Ribble's (1945) early work on mothers, researchers and practitioners have been noting the importance of parents being able to observe their children objectively.

Third, parents draw on a body of knowledge & Goodnow & Collins 1990, Goodnow & 1995; Sparling & Lowman, 1983) beliefs (Smetana, 1994; Sigel, 1985, Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow,1992) and feelings (Goodnow, 1988; Lamb & Easterbrooks, 1981) to think about a situation. This information is both general and specific (Lerner, 1993). What are children of this temperament like? What can a parent expect of a child of a certain age? And how is my specific child like and different from these norms?

Parents' body of information also includes philosophical ideas and cultural beliefs (LeVine, 1988; Luster & Okagaki, 1993). Parents have beliefs about what children need to grow well (Newberger & Hoekstra, 1992; Sameroff & Fiese, 1992). Children need opportunities to explore both in their physical world and, as they get older, in the world of ideas." Or "Children need to learn not to touch." Parents have goals and values (Goodnow, 1995). "In the twenty-first century adults are going to have to be more caring about others, the environment and about themselves. This is what I want for my children."

The diagram in Figure 2 shows all the general bodies of knowledge found through a literature search. It does not include the specifics such as information about: the child with a different learning style or a serious disease; what makes for a healthy diet and what inoculations a child should have; the needs of children whose parents have divorced or children who are gifted or exceptionally talented musically. These specifics have not been compiled in any one place. (A task being undertaken by the National Parenting Education Network.)

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Fourth are the thinking skills parents use to manipulate and interrelate all the knowledge and possibilities about a situation that they have, as demonstrated by Ehrensaft's (1987) subjects as couples discussed how they were going to share parenting responsibilities and Gerson's (1985) describing how they had made difficult parenting decisions. The list of thinking skills in Figure 2 is an adaptation of that used in school curricula on teaching thinking and problem solving skills (). In my current research I have found that parents use all of these skills though not one parent uses all at one time. Examples which reflect a thinking skill are, "My parents yelled a lot. I didn't like it and don't want to do it." Or "We had such good times in my family of origin. I want my children to have similar family fun" (Heath, research in process). By thinking, parents evolve a plan.

Finally, parenting demands that parents have a multitude of skills if they are to be able to implement their plans effectively: They need to know how to comfort their specific baby and help that baby relax and go to sleep; They need to know how to structure homework so that children get it done and learn how to organize it themselves; They need to know how to deal with those scary situations that teenagers are good at getting involved in--just to name a few. The major types of skills are shown in Figure 2.

This diagram illustrates the parenting process. It presents the attitudes, information and skills parents use when figuring out how to deal with a situation. It also diagrams how these competencies may relate to each other as parents decide how they want to handle a situation. It expands and makes more specific those parental competencies about which Belsky wrote in his 1984 landmark paper on the topic. It also gives a description of the complexity of parenting and why parent behavior is so difficult to predict. (The list of content and skills is generalized. They do not include the specialized needs for information of parents with learning disabled children, for example, or whose child have serious illnesses.)

Using Competencies to Describe Curricula and Parental Strengths, Interests and Preferences

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Taking the information and skills that parents use as they care for their children and that are diagrammed in Figure 2 creates a list of competencies parents need. This list provides a standard with which to describe a curriculum and the strengths, interests and preferences of parents. These competencies are listed in each part of the questionnaire (pp. 22, 24 and 25). The reviewer of a curriculum may be able to determine the competencies covered in its table of context. Often it will be necessary to read the curriculum to identify the information and skills that are presented.

The relative ease of determining the content of a curriculum by identifying the competencies covered is demonstrated by using the outline of a discussion series, *Parenting Creatively* (see Figure 3). During the discussion series the following topics are covered: developmental states, feelings, goals, learning styles, needs, the parental role and temperament. Not covered, at least according to the discussion outline, are building and maintaining relationships, using needs to motivate children, safety issues, self-esteem and sibling and peer relationships. Skills are also taught in this series: advocate for children, brainstorm, calm self-take a perspective, communicate, design an appropriate environment, observe, plan, use community resources (Heath, 1993).

Parents and professionals can use the lists found in the questionnaire on page 24 and 25 to identify the strengths and interests of the people who will use the curriculum These questions will given answers to such questions as: What do these parents know and what can they do? What other information and skills do they need? And what of all the knowledge parents need does this curriculum offer?

Parents using the second part of the questionnaire identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Frequently heard comments, "I want to deal with my anger. I do not handle feelings well." "I've got the 'I' statements down but I'm weak in helping my children learn how to problem solve." Giving parents a list rather than asking them to draw up their own allows them to choose competencies they often would not consider as relevant to parenting. Parents make such

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comments as, "I never thought of the planning involved in parenting, though I do it all the time." Seeing their strengths and content about which they want to know more helps parents decide what they want from a parenting curriculum.

Comparing the two lists, one completed about a specific curriculum and the other by a parent or for a parent group, indicates how well that curriculum will meet the content needs of that parent or parent group.

Curricula's Methods of Presenting Content

The third criterion for selecting curricula is a consideration of the recommendations for how to present the content. Typical descriptions of curricula list methods: lectures, mini lectures, group discussions, role-play, videos, etc. Such descriptions tell little about how curriculum users relate to the content.

Ruth Thomas (1998) presents a system that gives an overview of what the methods are to accomplish rather than a simple description of what is to be done. Her overview describes different perspectives taken towards the information in a curriculum and towards the role of the learner and the presenter. The system has three categories of perspectives, that of transmitting, that of transacting and that of transforming. The transmitting perspective expects the presenter to decide what is to be learned, views knowledge as scientific facts to be learned; and sees the role of participants to absorb the knowledge. The transacting perspective expects the presenter with the participants to decide what is to be discussed, views relevant knowledge as a combination of scientific and personal experience about which the participant is to think and reflect and sees the role of participants as active partners in the educational process. The transforming perspective expects the participants to determine the content, views scientific knowledge as information to be acquired in terms of ones own experience, and sees the role of participants as people seeking to incorporate new understandings and turn them into action. (Editors: If Ruth Thomas's paper is included in the edited volume, this section could refer back to that.).

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Thomas's system raises provocative questions such as: Are participants' experiences brought into the curriculum? Is the source of useful information viewed to be the scientific writings, parental experience or both? Does the presentation of the content encourage participants to master the information, relate it to their life experience or focus entirely on their life experiences? Do the presentation methods encourage participants to follow the guidance of the curriculum, think through how they, the participants, want to nurture their children or have participants continue nurturing their children as they have been doing. Is parental behavior expected to improve as participants master the presented content, reflect on life experiences as suggested by the curriculum or seek to change environmental circumstances and role expectations?

The *Leader's Manual for Parenting Creatively* (Heath, 1993) illustrates how this meta-analysis can guide curriculum analysis. For example, one of the questions raised by Thomas'(1998) scheme is how parental experiences are incorporated into the content of a curriculum. This manual answers the question when it recommends that parents' concerns be listed during the first session and discussed as content relevant to curriculum is presented. For instance if participants have raised questions about sibling relationships the manual suggests they be discussed when developmental stages are the topic. The manual outlines how the implications of development can be illustrated using examples about sibling relationships drawn from the participants. Another question raised by Thomas's system is whether or not participants are encouraged to relate information to their life experiences. The manual recommends that with specific topics, such as human development and temperament patterns, parents identify their children's level of development and temperament patterns.

Thomas's system provides more insight into the methods and how the content is to be used than does a simple listing of how the content is to be presented. Putting the questions her system raises into questionnaire form gives curriculum reviewers a method of analyzing how a curriculum recommends content be presented (see p. 23).

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The mega-system suggests questions parents can ask of a curriculum. Do I want input into the content of the curriculum? Do I see value in other people's experiences? Am I looking for solutions or for help to think through my issues? What kind of change do I want to see? These questions are also part of the questionnaire (see p.24).

Professionals can ask similar questions. Should participants have input into the content of the curriculum? Is there value to be gained by hearing other people's experiences? How does this group of parents appear to learn best? Will they feel comfortable describing their experiences? Do I want participants to expect answers or to look for solutions? What kind of change do I want to see? (See p. 25.)

One important criterion to consider when selecting curricula is the set of methods recommended for presenting the information. The questions listed here and added to the questionnaire ask about methods used and how participants will relate to them.

Emotional Support Provided Through Curriculum

The fourth criterion for describing curriculum is its potential for supporting or undermining the users' sense of integrity, self-esteem and self-competence Sarason, B., Sarason, I. & Piece, B. 1990; Veiel & Baumann, 1992). When discussing support the assumption too frequently is made that whatever is being offered is positive. Asking for parents' reactions to the same event, however, has shown a wide variation ranging from it being extremely supportive to non supportive, even cruel. Therefore any consideration of support must provide for an indication of range varying from supportive to non-supportive.()

Of the many kinds of emotional support that have been identified in the literature (Gottlieb, 1992), only two are relevant when discussing just the curricula, not the setting in which it is presented. Those two criteria are the support participants find in the content of the curriculum and in the methods used in presenting the curriculum.

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Participants feel supported when the content presented agrees with their thoughts and opinions. They feel unsupported and even undermined when they do not agree with the recommendations made. Parents, following unquestioningly their culture's belief that sparing the rod spoils the child, that children must be severely disciplined to grow properly, are not going to feel supported listening to content that openly criticizes spanking. High achieving parents will feel supported when hearing of the advantages of having their high schoolers take college level courses.

When professionals talk about a curriculum being culturally sensitive, they are frequently speaking of content that differs from the beliefs of an ethnic group(). The tendency is to think of minority cultural groups. But all parents need affirmation of their beliefs or a careful discussion when questioning them. Selecting a curriculum that meets the needs of individuals requires recognizing that even content has an emotional component that varies in its impact from individual to individual and from group to group.

This criterion of the support to be gained through the philosophy and beliefs of the curriculum is perhaps the most difficult to assess for two reasons. One, the content is so vast and the possibilities for agreement or disagreement so large, it is impossible to list them all. Issues can be small such as whether or not to eventually stop using "I" message and start problem solving. Or the issue can be major such as basing all advice on the assumption that all adolescents' behavior is driven by the need to leave home. It simply is impossible to list all the areas where variance of opinion is possible. Second, little effort has been made to identify the varying philosophical positions and specific advice about child rearing that are current in the United States. Not knowing either the issues around which conflict may arise or the differing philosophical points-of-view leaves parents and professionals little direction as to what to look for.

In wanting to select a curriculum that will be supportive, the best that can be done is to be aware, to ask questions and to be sensitive to the positions of parents who will be using the curriculum.

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Thererfore, on the questionnaire are general questions asking about the philosophical positions and the child-rearing advice given in the curricula (see p. 23).

These questions are too theoretical for most parents to answer. Leaders of the group or professionals working with the groups will most likely have to rely on their own knowledge of the groups who will use the curriculum to select a curriculum whose philosophical approach and advice given is best suited (see p. 26).

Methods used to present content can make a parent feel comfortable and able to learn or defensive and isolated. And the same method can produce different feelings in different people. Some feel comfortable with and can use the information from a lecture or by reading a book. Others want a discussion where the information can be questioned and debated and the skills adapted and practiced. Some will share their experiences fully. Others are more reticent. There is some evidence that people's ethnic backgrounds influence which methods of presentation they will feel more comfortable with and can use most effectively (). People's preferences will determine the comfort level they will find in the methods of presentation a curriculum uses.

The same questions on the questionnaire that were referred to earlier give information about participants' comfort level with different methods of presentation (see p. 24). This is also true for the questions that are asked about parent groups, (see p. 25). Answers to these questions can be compared to those obtained from the analysis of the methods recommended by the curriculum (see p. 23). For example, if a group of parents indicated they wanted to integrate knowledge into the situations with which they were dealing, a curriculum such as *Parenting Creatively* would fit their needs because it has built in ways personal experiences are integrated into content.

Leadership

Curricula vary as to the expectations set for the person who will present it(). The range of expectations varies from requiring no special training or personality characteristics to expecting

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presenters to be thoroughly knowledgeable in child development, adult learning, group process, plus know the specific curriculum well and have warm supportive personal skills (Minnesota Parent and Family Education Subgroup, 1997) Many curricula, such as the wel known Parent Effectiveness Training and STEP provide training in their specific curricula (Gordon,1975 and Dinkmeyer, 1976).

Likewise parents vary in how comfortable they feel with certain kinds of leadership. Parents may feel overwhelmed by a highly trained leader. Other parents expect their leader to be knowledgeable and experienced.

Questions about the leader are also part of the questionnaire used to select a curriculum (see pp. 23, 24, 25).

Other Characteristics

The other criteria that describe curricula that parents and professionals must consider are less complicated. Format, for instance, how many sessions and their length, is easily described but can be a major issue. Do parents have time for an eight-week discussion series, each session lasting two hours? Is providing programs during the lunch hour where parents are working an alternative? Cost and availability are other criteria. These rather obvious characteristics can rule out one curriculum for a particular group and make another particularly attractive. Questions related to these are criteria are at the beginning of each questionnaire (see pp. 22, 24, 25)

DISCUSSION

Other Criteria

The assumption on which this paper is based may be over simplified. This paper has focussed on selecting parenting curriculum based on the strengths, interests and preferences of the parents

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who will use it. It has assumed that a curricula that best meets the needs of the parents will be most effective.

Ruth Thomas's (1998) meta categories raises another criterion, one based on quality. Are some methods of presenting content more effective in helping participants master the material than others? She supports the belief, held by many educational philosophers, that programs are more effective if the recommended methods of presentation require participants to become actively involved in using the material as opposed to the content being absorbed as a mass of information.

As Thomas reviews there is certainly a significant body of research supporting her position. There are also unanswered questions. Do the results hold for all ethnic groups? Will parents come to meetings if they do not feel comfortable with the methods being used?

There are other issues of quality besides the best methods of presenting material. Is one philosophy about why people grow and develop preferable to another, making a curriculum using the preferred philosophy more acceptable (Newberger, 1980; Sigel, 1982)? Is some advice preferable to other, i.e. one method of discipline more effective (Swift, 1995)?

Issues related to best methods both of presentation and child rearing advice are difficult to answer at this time in our understanding of parenting education. There is not unanimity about the answers. The questioning should continue to keep the issues before parent educators and to keep the researchers aware of them.

Other uses of the list of competencies and of the questionnaire

The competencies presented in Figure 2 may serve other purposes not relevant to choosing curriculum but very relevant to parenting education. Parent educators can use them to determine the adequacy of available curricula. Are all the competencies important to parenting presented in some curriculum somewhere? Many parenting programs were developed by professionals who

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saw in their professional work a need of parents. For example, most of the parent programs on communication skills were developed by counselors who found in their work with parents a need for different ways of talking with their children and of achieving their children's cooperation. These programs have been powerful and useful to parents. However, there easily could be other competencies parents could use that have not been addressed because the need did not fit into another professional field's perspective.

Another purpose listing the competencies can fill is to alert professionals to share with each other, competencies they have identified as important but that are not already identified. Important ones may have been recognized by professionals in very diverse fields and reported in their professional journals but not in the main stream. Circulating the list developed here will, hopefully, alert those writers to bring their insights to the attention of other professionals working with parents..

Lastly, the questionnaire provides a means of assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum. By identifying the competencies the curriculum reports presenting, assessment research can determine whether or not it does so. For instance, if a review of a curriculum content states that it covers adolescent development and communication patterns, then one method of assessment would be to determine that these topics were covered and were understood by the participants.

SUMMARY

The position taken in this article is that the diversity of parenting programs is an advantage and that one program can not possibly meet the needs and interests of all parents. The challenge, therefore, is to find the curriculum that will best suit a specific parent or group of parents.

To meet that challenge the author developed a questionnaire that parents and/or professionals can use to analyze what a curriculum has to offer and to compare that analysis with the strengths, interests and preferences of potential users. The approach was first to identify and then describe

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characteristics of curricula that are relevant when seeking to select a curriculum for a specific group. Criteria selected were: objective or purpose of curriculum, its content, suggested methods for presenting content, emotional support emanating from the curriculum, kind of leadership, format of sessions, cost and availability. Three criteria were particularly complex and needed explanations: The description of content evolved from an analysis of the parenting process that identified competencies parents use as they nurture their children. These competencies provide a means of describing the content of a curriculum. A meta analysis of methods used to present content focuses reviewers on how the users of a curriculum will relate to the content. Lastly, consideration was given to the potential emotional support the content and methods of delivery could give to recipients.

The criteria, describing the curriculum, provided the substance for writing lists and questions that make up all three parts of the questionnaire. One part of the questionnaire asks about the curriculum being reviewed. The second part is for parents to use to identify their strengths, interests and preferences. The third asks questions similar to those asked in the second part and is for professionals looking for a curriculum to use with a specific group of parents. Comparing the answers to the various parts of the questionnaire will give direction as to the potential benefits of a curriculum for a particular audience. The questionnaire is a means of meeting the challenge of finding an appropriate parenting curriculum for a specific parent or group of parents.

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Figure 1

THE PARENTING PROCESS*

Parents involved

A. Planning

1. What is the situation?
2. What are the options?
3. Guides for deciding which options to implement:
   a. What are the goals?
   b. What are the needs of the people involved?
   c. What are the specific characteristics of the people involved that should be considered?
      their temperament
      their developmental level

B. Doing/Implementing

C. Reflecting: Assessing your progress

**Adapted from Planning: A Key to Mastering the Challenge of Parenting, Heath 1998*

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THE PARENTING PROCESS
Ego System

PARENT/CAREGIVER

Attitude
- Importance of Parent Role
- Involvement
- Psychological Availability

Mental Processing

Awareness of Situation
Observational Skills

Organizes Input Information

Understands Based on Previous Experience

Automatic Methods of Handling

PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

Knowledge, Beliefs, Feelings

Self and Family Members
- background/history
- developmental level
- feelings
- identity
- interests
- learning style
- needs
- physical makeup
- relationships
- temperament

General Information
- affect-acceptance/expression
- attachment/relationships
- developmental process
- developmental stages
- goals/values
- identity
- learning styles
- needs of people
- needs as motivators
- options/choices
- parental role
- temperament

Basic Life Knowledge

Thinking

Anticipating
Brainstorming
Causal Reasoning
Deductive Thinking
Descriptive Reporting
Empathizing
Evaluating/Assessing
Identifying Relationships
Imagining
Inductive Reasoning
Interpreting
Judging
Organizing
- categorizing
- noting differences
- noting similarities
- sequencing

Planning/Problem Solving
Reflecting

Skills—Ability to:

Build a Relationship
Communicate
- body language
- expressive
- verbal
  - discuss
  - relate to others
  - teach/discipline/guide

Design Environment
Enjoy
Implement Life Skills
Model
Play
Relax
Utilize Resources

Figure 2

Choosing Parenting Curricula

Diagram 1
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In consultation with Dana Murphy

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Figure 3

PARENTING CREATIVELY: DISCUSSION SERIES OUTLINE

Session 1	Getting to Know Each Other Reasons for Being Here - Yours and Mine Wanting to Implement Our Quaker Values - Questions Raised Overview of Discussion Series: Planning for Our Families Our Specific Situations: Describing Them Using Observation Skills Brainstorming Options: What Are Our Choices? Relaxation Skills
Session 2	Sharing Our Specific Situations More on Observation Skills Feelings: How Do We Allow for Them? Families: What are our Goals for Them? Helping Our Children Relax
Session 3	Goals: How Do We Work For Them? Families of Origin Communication Skills: Using Them to Work Towards Our Goals
Session 4	Needs: How Do We Meet Ours and Those of Our Children? Communication Skills: Practicing Them
Session 5	Characteristics of People: How do We Plan for Them Physical; Developmental Level; and Past Experience Adapting Communication Style to Developmental Level of Child
Session 6	Characteristics of People: How Do We Plan for Them? Temperament; Learning Style; and Interests Community Resources: How Can We Use Them Effectively?
Session 7	Sharing How We View Children Defining for Ourselves the Parental Role Structuring Our Environments: Using Time, Space and Equipment
Session 8	Deciding/Planning Planning for Other Situations

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